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FRIDAY

THEATER & MUSIC

ON STAGE

"The piece really does delve quite deeply into the experience of making theater." — director Frank Galati

Steppenwolf Theatre's revival of "The Royal Family," a dark comedy that deals with theater people's dysfunction, opens Sunday.

THEATER/ BACKSTAGE

Delving into theater creatures

'The Royal Family' revival retains its bite

Frank Galati, a dyed-in-the-wool creature of the American theater, loves to expound on why people who work in show business are weird.

"We go to work when everybody else goes out to play," mused the accomplished actor-director-adapter the other day. "Everybody else goes to the office, and we go to sleep. And on Mondays, when the week is just beginning for the rest of the world, we're all taking the day off."

Chris Jones
Tribune arts reporter

Martha Lavey, artistic director of Steppenwolf Theatre Company, recognizes this phenomenon as "the upside-down life." It's why she says, actors often have trouble maintaining relationships with those on a more usual schedule.

Like journalists, who are notorious for endless public musings on the nature and nuances of their profession, theatrical types also like to gaze at their navels in public. Heck, they've been doing it for hundreds of years, probably even before the days of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. "The Royal Family," a dark comedy that deals with the dysfunction of professional theater people, has been revived regularly since it first showed up on Broadway back in 1927. Galati's revival opens Sunday at Steppenwolf with a cast that includes Amy Morton, Sally Murphy, Rondi Reed, Lois Smith and Alan Wilder.

Penned by George S. Kaufman (best known for his comic collaborations with Moss Hart) and Edna Ferber (whose novels became the source for the musical "Showboat" and numerous films, including "Giant"), "The Royal Family" was intended as a spoof of the Barrymores, then the reigning stage family in America.

The point of the play was not missed by the objects of its sharp wit — Ethel Barrymore threatened a lawsuit.

But even though the real Barrymores probably have passed from public consciousness, Drew notwithstanding, "The Royal Family" has retained most of its bite. Divas and debutantes, histrionic actors and the passionate insanity of persons theatrical know no chronological bounds.

Not only was this play filmed by George Cukor in 1930, but it also was revived for the Bicentennial in Washington (with George Grizzard and Rosemary Harris) and even seen recently at the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis. Goodman Theatre did the show some 30 years ago. Last year, Dame Judi Dench headlined a revival in London's West End, directed by Sir Peter Hall.

"It's always been an enormously attractive story," Galati said of the tale of the Cavendishes, a theatrical family with multiple generations of obsessives. "The characters have a wide psychological range. And the piece really does delve quite deeply into the experience of making theater."

Lavey says she liked the idea of doing the show because of its progressive attitude toward gender ("The Royal Family" features several generations of feisty, professional women) and its dark undertone.

Galati just likes exploring his passion — the business of doing plays.

"This play has an open heart and open arms," he says. "It embraces the full course of a life in theater, with all of its extravagance, egomania, crankiness and narcissism."

Could this be a metaphor for Galati's own process?

As contraire, says he.

"Me, cranky? Me, egomaniacal? Never. Never."

And how about the notion of the Steppenwolf ensemble as The Royal Family of the Chicago theater?

Donny Osmond

"We're not as classy as the Cavendishes," Galati says. "But we sure know how to play up."

Donny is back

Donny Osmond warbled a Stephen Sondheim number down the phone last week, apparently in answer to the question of how much his Chicago Theatre concert on Saturday night was in support of his recent album of Broadway show tunes.

Clearly, folks who saw and enjoyed Osmond during his two-year stint in "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" in this same theater will be getting their Broadway fix this weekend, along with a retrospective of Osmond's multiple decades in the business.

"I'm bringing back the original coat of many colors with me," Osmond said, with nary a trace of irony, of his upcoming Chicago stand. "I've never really performed 'Close Every Door to Me' in concert, but I will be doing it in Chicago. It will be very special for me there."

Osmond, who did a great deal for the recent growth of downtown theater in Chicago, moved his family to the Chicago area during his remarkable "Joseph" stand (they've since gone back to Utah because they "wanted the mountains"). Osmond says he regards his time on the stage of the Chicago Theatre as a turning point in his career.

"Think about it for a moment. I was a teenybopper. Then I went into the "Donnie and Marie" show, which was cute variety. Then there was a real difficult transition point before I was considered to be a true legitimate entertainer."

"Joseph" and Chicago came to the rescue.

"You can't do a musical in Chicago for that long," Osmond said, with indisputable logic, "without people knowing that you're serious about the theater."

"Donny Osmond," 8 p.m. Saturday, Chicago Theatre, 175 N. State St., $40-$65; 312-559-1212.

"The Royal Family"
When: Through June 16
Where: Steppenwolf Theatre, 1650 N. Halsted St.
Price: $45-$55; 312-335-1650

CHECK IT OUT

10 HOT PICKS THIS WEEK

Veteran rock guitarist Link Wray will perform at the Abbey Pub on Wednesday.

MUSIC

Link Wray: Rock guitar doesn't get any better than it does in the hands of this veteran wizard. 9 p.m. Wednesday; Abbey Pub, 3420 W Grace St. $20; 773-478-4408.

Alfred Brendel: Magic comes from this veteran pianist. 3 p.m. Sunday, Symphony Center, 220 S. Michigan Ave. $19-$44; 312-294-3000.

Joffrey Ballet: This "Encore, Arpino" program is all Gerald Arpino, all the time. Through Sunday, Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Congress Pkwy. $29-$69; 312-902-1500.

Spiritualized: A magical mixture of rock and sonic atmospherics. 7:30 p.m. Monday, Vic Theatre, 3145 N. Sheffield Ave. $17.50; 312-559-1212.

Spirit Caravan: Wino and his mates provide sublime rock heaviness. 10 p.m. Thursday, Double Door, 1572 N. Milwaukee Ave. $8; 312-639-1233.

The Dictators: These punk trailblazers still have the magic. 9:30 p.m. Sunday, Empty Bottle, 1035 N. Western Ave. $12; 773-276-3600.

Mingus Big Band: This ensemble that is packed with virtuosity comes to town for a brief stint, Saturday-Monday at the Jazz Showcase, 59 W. Grand Ave. $30; 312-670-2473.

Germain Randrianrisoa ("Rajery"): Hear this valiha (zither-like instrument) virtuoso from Madagascar. 7 p.m. Monday, Chicago Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington St. Free; 312-744-6630.

THEATER

"Five Guys Named Moe": This immersion in the songs of Louis Jordan is an interesting and enjoyable revue. Through May 26, Drury Lane Theatre Evergreen Park, 2500 W. 95th St., Evergreen Park. $23-$46; 708-423-5404.

"The Trip to Bountiful": Ann Whitney shines in this profound reading of Horton Foote's drama about a woman's trip to her childhood home. Through May 26, American Theater Company, 1909 W. Byron St. $25-$30; 773-929-1031.

MUSIC/ PLAY ON

Untamed Dishes keep dishing it out

Chicago's bustling live music scene offers something for everyone this week — loud and fast noise, oblique and ambitious songwriting, adventurous deejays and pure Texas blues. Looking at acts scheduled to hit town, here's a sonic sampler, culled from a batch of their new and recent albums:

Greg Kot
Tribune rock critic

The Dishes, "1-2" (No. 89): From the sing-sneer in Sarah Slaskaukas' voice to the rude beating administered by Alianna Kalaba's drums, the Dishes keep rock exactly where it belongs: locked in the garage, kicking at the world outside. Actually, the Dishes are too smart to throw tantrums.

Slaskaukas could be Richard Hell's cool sister, in the way she manages to simultaneously sound ticked off, sullen and so over it. The quartet's second album makes no attempt to embellish on the pull-no-punches debut, and why should it? From the mocking "Girls Can't Play" to the wickedly surreal "Pink Stucco Bungalow" this is a small (14 songs, 30 minutes) but lethal dose of "Nuggets"-style mania that requires nothing more than a twist of the volume knob to enjoy. *(The Dishes give a free in-store performance at 7 p.m. Friday at Reckless Records, 1532 N. Milwaukee Ave.; 773-235-3727).*

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Dictators, "D.F.F.D." (DFFD): Give them this, "D.F.F.D." technically sounds better than your beat-up cassette-only copy of "[Expletive] 'Em if They Can't Take a Joke," the 1981 Dictators manifesto on the ROIR label, with liner notes by Richard Meltzer lionizing them as the original New York City punk band. Otherwise, it's pretty much the same band and the same sound: A blue-collar collision of punk, metal and arena anthems. Even in these slightly more sanitized grooves, it's still possible to envision Handsome Dick Manitoba dousing himself in beer while asking the rhetorical question, "Who Will Save Rock and Roll." *(The Dictators headline Sunday at the Empty Bottle, 1035 N. Western Ave., 312; 773-276-3600.)*

W.C. Clark, "From Austin With Soul" (Alligator): Clark has been a fixture in Texas blues for four decades; his blend of tough, taut six-string leads and plaintive soul vocals made a deep impression on Stevie Ray Vaughan, among others (Clark's "Cold Shot" became one of the late guitar slinger's signature tunes). Clark remains a formidable live performer, drawing on a repetoire that touches on his days with Joe Tex on the chitlin' circuit, a terrific band with Vaughan and Lou Ann Barton that barnstormed through Texas in the '70s, and series of solo recordings, beginning in 1986 with the self-released "Something for Everybody." But the lack of consistently distinctive songwriting — the bane of most contemporary blues albums — keeps "From Austin With Soul" a notch below Clark's peak efforts, several of which were cut for the Black Top label in the '90s. Fans of Robert Cray's soul-blues efforts should immediately investigate, however. *(Clark headlines Saturday at Buddy Guy's Legends, 754 S. Wabash Ave., $15; 312-427-0333).*

Pedro the Lion, "Control" (Jade Tree): David Bazan's exploration of the metaphysical world, from a distinctly but hardly overbearing Christian perspective, has stamped him as one of rock's most ambitious songwriters. But now the band's studio sound is starting to catch up with his ideas, and Pedro the Lion's third album boasts thicker, more textured arrangements that take the duo out of the mid-fi ghetto. What hasn't changed is Bazan's demeanor: as unflappably grim as an undertaker whether the subject is pleasure ("Rapture") or pain ("Second Best"). His least optimistic songs ("Priests and Paramedics," "Rejoice") are invariably cut with a humor so dark that even the late comic-from-hell Bill Hicks might recognize Bazan as a kindred spirit *(Pedro the Lion plays Monday at Metro, 3730 N. Clark St., $10; 773-549-0203).*

X-Ecutioners, "Built from Scratch" (Loud/Columbia): Were it only true. In concert, the essence of Roc Raida, Rob Swift and Total Eclipse is their mind-blowing, six-turntable deejaying. They blend acrobatic synchronized routines with improvisation; they're the hip-hop equivalent of a jazz combo or slamming funk orchestra. But despite the album title's proclamation, "Built from Scratch" isn't. Instead, the turntable wizardry of this vaunted New York deejay crew is more like an afterthought in a cameo-crammed major-label debut. Understandably, the powers that be at Columbia were probably ecstatic about, if not insisting upon, the presence of such ringers as Linkin Park and Everlast. This album even includes an already dated "Who Wants to be a Millionaire" sketch. Like the television program, "Built from Scratch" is played out — a far cry from the trio's ground-breaking live shows. *(X-Ecutioners play Friday at House of Blues, 329 N. Dearborn, $15; 312-923-2000.)*

Hear Greg Kot on "Sound Opinions" at 10 p.m. every Tuesday on WXRT (93.1) FM.

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